

## Transitions: Carl Rippberger

### Affirming Carl Rippberger

by Billy Baillargeon

Carl Rippberger's community attributes and contributions are legion and legend, so I will not diminish them by attempting to capsule them for you. Rather, to a small extent I would like to remember Carl on a more personal basis and relate how that drew me into the Affirmation's family. It is easy to cast back over the more than I'd like to admit years to grasp upon my first lasting image of Carl, leaning over the bannister at JP's and yelling "Billy, you're a PIG." Of course, I realized that this was a man with clear insight and intuition. From that point on Carl and I set upon building a friendship that I continue to hold dear to this day.

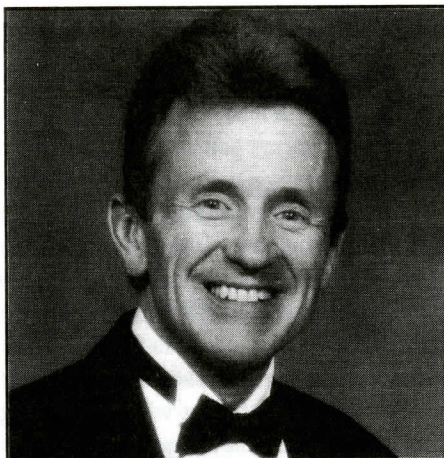
Although eulogies and obituaries have expounded upon the public and community-wide contributions Carl made, friends well know how personally and emotionally deep-seated were his commitments. This emotions and passion could at times manifest itself in exasperation and frustration - but only as boundaries within which he refused to be contained. He overcame such obstacles to strive toward his goals of community commitment and cohesion. Many knew the public Carl who repeatedly opened Backstreet to fund-raisers and benefits. But, into those functions, Carl poured his energy, experience and emotion to an extent to which most were unaware. Though I will not go into the details of what such special events entailed for Carl and his staff, suffice it to say, many unheralded expenditures both physical and financial

#### Remembering James Continued..

James left on the screen saver of Hayden, his computer, at the office when he went to the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum Conference in Secaucus, New Jersey, earlier this year. James wrote, Hayden, while I am gone, I trust you will be faithful.

I want to assure James today that we, like Hayden, will be faithful to him with gentleness and laughter.

- Julie



went into their production. You couldn't just open the doors and expect to get a crowd.

Over the years that we were friends, Carl and I loved to discuss the status of Detroit in general from Coleman Young to the proposed Tiger Stadium; and after we focused more specifically on the gay and lesbian community as well. Via his insight, interest and knowledge I came to see a vision of the community that could be. Carl inspired those he touched to actively participate in transforming that vision of a community that could be, into a community that will be. Through Carl's eyes I could see, gathering unto itself, the clay by which our community was and is forming itself, molding itself and building itself.

By virtue, in large part, of Carl's encouragement and vision, I began to devote more of my available time to Affirmations, and more recently to the Triangle Foundation. In both organizations, Carl saw building blocks for the community of not only gay, lesbian and bi's, but of greater metropolitan Detroit as well.

Probably more than for any other single project, Carl had high expectations and hopes for the Affirmations Youth Group. It was due to Carl that I first learned of this Group's existence, and inspired by his convictions, I grew to appreciate the need for such a peer youth group. The more I learned the more I came to be convinced, along with Carl, that there was no more important role possible than to provide these young people with a safe, secure space within which they could freely express their desires, fears, hopes, concerns,

torments, empathy and the simple opportunity to socialize. Make no mistake about the group, it is young people helping themselves and each other in a way that often shames me when I reflect on the manner in which many adult groups and organizations proceed. They are creating now, the community that will be, envisioned by Carl. And make no mistake about one other thing -- though the youth group has several champions I know of none that surpassed Carl in his passion, commitment and just plain love for that group.

On a Saturday evening only a week before he died, Carl and I had dinner and planned to see a movie. The movie was sold out, so we visited for two hours waiting for the next. Those two hours were a very special gift to me which I cling to as something precious. During that visit, which was to be our last, we discussed many things, but in particular we spoke of Affirmations and the Triangle Foundation. Ironically, Carl wanted to wade into them with more than his financial support. He wanted to devote his time to helping those two organizations in any way that they could use him. His worry was that they might not have a use to which to put him. I wish I were a more accomplished writer so that I could do justice to our exchange. We began to discuss means of effectively reaching the members of the Youth Group in terms of AIDS. I told him of recent reports that indicated that young people in general gays and lesbians in particular were beginning to tune out the AIDS message. I told him that I had conducted informal surveys of members of the Youth Group and found that they felt the best means to really "connect" was to put a face, a person to the disease, someone that they could talk to on a personal basis. How do I tell you of the energy that pulsed from Carl, the spark - the blazing fire in his clear eyes, the leaning forward physically to put himself figuratively and literally at the group's disposal. He wanted to use his life, his personal story, his face to get through to the members of the Youth Group the personal nature of the threat that hangs over our community. For the Youth Group and in

the hopes of their prolonged safety and health, Carl was willing to be the face of AIDS in our midst.

We did not have an opportunity to use Carl as we discussed that rather chilly Saturday night. A week later, Carl's life gave up on him. Those tremendous energies and enthusiasms flowed no more from his animated frame -- but flow, even flood, they still do. Carl's commitment to Affirmations now stands sentinel to his memory in yet another form, the form of a bequest of \$150,000. His legacy streams also through Tom Guisepppe, with whom Carl bickered in a manner more loving and amusing than any Hollywood or Broadway comic married couple. Tom too, is determined that Carl's legacy live on and he will work tirelessly to fulfill Carl's wishes. Yet another testament to Carl's energies and style is his staff at Backstreet, uniquely loyal to him in a manner so unusual and intimate that many of his employees actually worked with him from day one of the opening of Backstreet. They too are devoted to carrying on Carl's legacy of community commitment and cohesion. But more, much more, Carl's love, energy and enthusiasm now channels through us. Carl inspired me mightily, and I am but one of his many friends, all of whom, I am sure were similarly touched and inspired. Through us, and hopefully through those whom we inspire in turn, Carl's legacy continues and grows, just as he envisioned our community would continue and grow. When Carl wanted to get something done, it got done. Death will not stand in the way of his goals for our community.

*"...Sure as Life holds all parts together,  
Death holds all parts together,  
Do you enjoy what Life confers? you  
shall enjoy what Death confers,  
I do not understand the realities of Death,  
but I know they are great,  
I do not understand the least reality of Life --  
how then can I understand the realities of Death?"*

Walt Whitman  
Leaves of Grass